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Founder of Rabindrasangeet choir on new India mission

Swede sound of Tagore

HINDOL SENGUPTA AND
ANDREAS MATSSON

It seems like only yesterday, says Lars Eklund, that he arrived in Calcutta on May 1, 1982. "I had been travelling around India but the moment I landed in Calcutta, it felt like home. There was a sense of the arts all around me. Music, dance, painting, it was fascinating."

In a sense, it will be a homecoming again for the 60-something Lars when he arrives in India this week for the launch of SASNET—the Swedish South Asian Studies Network's new initiative called the Sweden-South Asia Media Project in Delhi.

Lars, who is at the forefront of this "dream project", has carried India, especially Calcutta, with him wherever he has gone. He is married to a Bengali and runs Scandinavia's first and only Rabindrasangeet choir.

It happened like this. In Calcutta in that hot May of 1982, he stayed as a guest at the home of the famous artist Annada Munshi, regarded by many as the father of commercial art in India and also blessed with a beautiful voice. He was a mentor to a young Satyajit Ray, who would often say that he learnt the "ABC of calligraphy" from Munshi. It was in Munshi's Tala Park home in north Calcutta that Lars met his daughter Bubu. It was "love at first sight".

Bubu, an exponent of Rabindrasangeet, had travelled with her group — Santiniketan Ashramik Sangha — across the country to perform. Lars travelled with the group to Asansol for their performance of Tagore's *Tasher Desh*. The relationship grew and Lars and Bubu married in December that year. "Though when I asked her to marry me, she said 'you have to talk to my father' — even though we liked each other very much! But, thankfully, her father liked me a lot too," laughs Lars.

The couple spent their honeymoon at Subhas Chandra Bose's summer home in Hazaribagh. By January 1983, the Eklunds were in Sweden, where they now live in the picturesque university town of Lund.

Lars has worked most of his life building a network of media professionals and researchers from Sweden and India



(left) Lars Eklund and wife Bubu on their wedding day in Calcutta in 1982; (above) the couple in a recent picture at Lund, Sweden

who exchange ideas, projects and resources with each other. Bubu, true to her calling, has worked hard to teach the Swedes some Indian culture — especially Tagore's music, performing in radio and on TV. And Lars has learnt to sing in Bengali as well!

It was in 2012 that the couple inaugurated their "other dream project" — a Swedish Rabindrasangeet choir. It now has 15 members, comprising an Indian and a Bangladeshi, but the rest all Swedes. The choir has performed at many concerts in Lund and also Uppsala, where a Tagore statue was unveiled at the university in 2013.

Last year, the choir toured Bengal and Orissa, performing at Calcutta's landmark Star Theatre together with Mamata Shankar's

troupe and also at Santiniketan, where they played for the students and faculty at the famous Sangeet Bhawan.

Why did it take so long to start the choir? Lars says, "Because Swedes thought Rabindrasangeet was difficult. It isn't but many people thought so."

Lars also remains a key member of SASNET, which acts as the hub of information on South Asia across Scandinavia. More Indians visit the SASNET website than Swedish, Lars proudly points out, and it connects more than 300 Swedish and even more International academic departments on the study of South Asia around the world.

The Sweden-South Asia Media Project will have a Delhi launch on December 7-9. The project aims to bring, each year, a dozen or so media researchers and journalists from Sweden and South Asia together in two installments — in Sweden and India — to collaborate on new media projects, including reporting on stories, exchanging data and even teaching younger media students. This will include an award of Rs 1 lakh for projects that show special effort in using digital technology in the social sector.

Through the Sweden-South Asia Media Project, Lars and his team hopes to dispel a few more doubts.

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